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A Few Moral Problems You Might Like to Ponder, of a Winter's Evening, in Front of the Fire, with a Cat on Your Lap

In this era of the insulted and the reeducated, you have the correct family background to be a model student. Your father was a peasant and your second elder sister was sold as a servant before Liberation. Chairman Mao is your sun and you are his sunflower. When he selects you to go to university, you denounce to your girlish heart the pride you feel.

The things you love are these: Chairman Mao, the Chinese people, the quiet in the Garden of Virtue at the Summer Palace, the plays of Tian Han, and *The Lady of the Camellias*, which you have read three times. At night, in bed, you sometimes imagine Alfredo coming to you. In these dreams, a yellow Chinese moon hangs in a violet Parisian sky.

At university you no longer take literature classes. The bourgeois subjects have been replaced by Mao Zedong Thought and Skills to Serve the People. In order to pass your course in Applied Marxist Dialectics you must denounce a counterrevolutionary revisionist element. You must follow the Four Methods and speak out freely. It is necessary to demonstrate your revolutionary zeal.

So you make a big-character poster about your Department Head. He has already been denounced by others so you do not feel responsible. You attend mass criticism sessions. In one, your Department Head is shouted at and slapped. His head has been shaved and there are little streams of blood running down his cheeks from razor cuts. He wears a dunce cap, and a tablet slung around his neck. He is made to turn round and round as you shout criticisms at him. You remember how he once spoke to you about Dumas *père* and Dumas *fils*, once about Flaubert. Afterwards, you destroy your copy of *The Lady of the Camellias*.

More struggle sessions ensue. You stand with the others in a circle and shout humiliation. But you have run out of criticisms and are repeating yourself. The others look at you. The harsher one is, the more revolutionary. But you are not creative. You repeat yourself. You repeat what others say. The Head sits with neck bowed and sobs. He will not look at you.

And then you make a mistake. As you are copying one of Chairman Mao's sayings

for a big-character poster, your mind drifts, and instead of writing “Whatever the enemy opposes, we should uphold,” you write “Whatever the enemy opposes, we should oppose.” It’s a silly mistake. It’s the sort of thing you sometimes do. Sometimes you add the salt twice to recipes for dough. But it is noticed. Your roommate moves out. You begin to see posters about yourself. One says you are guilty of Class Revenge, of being a Rightist. Another says you are the Department Head’s concubine. You come home to your room one day and discover that it has been ransacked.

At your struggle session you are made to sit in the middle of a classroom on an upended wastebasket. Someone has drilled a hole through your copy of Tian Han’s plays and hung it around your neck. Your head has been shaved. You can feel the blood trickling down behind your ear. When they shout at you, sometimes their spittle reaches your face. It is only the first of many such sessions of correction.

In the spring you are sent to the countryside for reeducation. You work in the fields and sleep in a cowshed. You undergo much hardship. It is cold and there is not enough to eat. From time to time you are put in a laundry room with other enemies of the people where you are told to slap one another. If you do not do as you are told you will be taken out and executed. So you slap and are slapped back. Your face turns black and blue and you cannot see out of your right eye. But you are lucky. It is not as bad as it could be.

There is someone here you recognize from the university. A librarian. She sits every morning in a pigsty reading Mao. You try to speak to her but she will not answer. She only bows her head and keeps reading. Her clothes are filthy with mud and urine. You leave her alone but come back the next day. You tell her about your Department Head and ask her if she knew him. You see tears come to her eyes. On the third day when you tell her you want to cleanse yourself of revisionist ideas, she finally speaks to you. She still will not look at you, but she tells you if you have a favorite book, find a passage you love. Criticize it. It is sure to be wrong.

You are getting thin. A gust of wind could blow you away.

★

Okay, this is the scene: You’re wearing your murder-ones and the world’s got that dark, smoked look you love. You’re hanging with your *vatos* at the corner of Euclid and Whittier and there’s a serious philosophical discussion underway. You’ve got to strike the right pose when serious philosophical discussions are underway, so in addition to the dark glasses you’ve got your sea-green drape wide at the shoulders, tight at the rear, your raspberry-colored shirt to add just the right touch, and on your feet your new Stacy Adamses. If anybody messes with the knife-edge crease in your pants there’s the .44 Bulldog strapped against your ribs. That about covers it.

Over at the curb Psycho Chico is mad-dogging every car that pulls up at the stoplight. He is not paying attention to the philosophical discussion.

It’s Plato doing most of the talking. College fucked up Plato something bad and you can hardly understand what he says anymore. But all the *vatos* listen because he’s Plato, you know? What he’s on about now is moving the gang out of banging into

something more intellectually satisfying. That's what he says, "intellectually satisfying." From behind your murder-ones you catch Extra-Cheese's eye and the look that passes between you is messed up for sure. But you don't want to disrespect Plato so you think you'll just check out for a minute or two, let the smoke take over, observe the world at the corner of Euclid and Whittier: the Saturday-night lowriders on parade, the *chicas* going by with their asses in the air, the pizza smell, the taillights smearing the boulevard, and the six of you—Plato, Psycho Chico, Extra-Cheese, Inca, Little Inca, and you, Homo—hanging in your *trapos* like a *Vanity Fair* photographer is due any minute.

"*¡Qué es el vigio!*" Psycho Chico shouts at a car full of Americans. He shows them his gun from out of his waistband and they take off, right through the red light. You laugh, everybody laughs. The smoke gets handed to you from Little Inca's direction.

It's got something to do with gambling, what Plato's on about, only he doesn't mean *that* gambling, it's *metaphysical* gambling he means. (Man, it hurts your brain listening to this *vato*.) Like you are all the victims of fate, chance, shit like that.

"Like hanging here," Plato says, "inviting a bullet."

Extra-Cheese and you exchange looks: you are hanging here *offering* bullets is what you and Extra-Cheese are doing, Psycho Chico too, though you might be willing to admit Plato's is another way of looking at it. Street corner roulette, he calls it. He likes saying this so much, he says it again, then hangs back, looks you all over. He's got his pants pegged and that cool white *tando* but you are beginning to wonder about him. *Probability*, he says like he's taking out his double deuce, only it's words instead of bullets.

"Man, what you *on*?"

"Like last Christmas, when Little Homo got jumped in that fucked-up jack." He purposely doesn't look at you. Little Homo was your brother. This is some sore shit for you and your heart. "Check out the variables," Plato says. "Suppose that night we hang on the northbound instead of the southbound. Or we don't go after the Honda, but wait for something with more *huevos*. The variables, man—"

But you are remembering that night. The sorry-ass Christmas decorations on the avenue. The cold that made you want to jack in the first place. You were wearing your Killer 54's and your Ben Davis pants. Little Homo was khakied down, except with sandals so his feet were cold. When the Honda pulled up it was you who went and stood in front of the bumper so they couldn't scoot, Inca at the rear, and Little Homo flashing his 9-mm at the driver's window. There was the terror-struck face you could see through the windshield, and Little Inca laughing, and then the car you should've seen drawing alongside the Honda, the cherried-out Galaxie you should've recognized before the window rolled down, before the single-shot stuck out its sawed-off nose, before Little Homo was blown against the side of the Honda, the back of his shirt suddenly crimson, and before he collapsed on the pavement, looking up at you and whispering your name, not Homo, but your *name*, man: *Luis! Luis!*

"You're all fucked," Plato is saying. "What you got to do is be fucked on your own terms."

“¿Y qué?” Psycho Chico says. He’s come over from the curbside.

“You got to take *control*, man,” Plato says and he draws himself up, throws his shoulders back, like there, he’s said it.

“What, exactly, do we got to take control *of*?” you say.

He still doesn’t look at you. He’s got his eyes swinging out over the boulevard like there’s something to see. “You got to eliminate the middleman,” he says.

And then—it is one of the coolest things you will ever see—he does it. He takes from out of its strap his Redhawk with the blued barrel, flicks open the cylinder, and lets the cartridges fall out of their chambers into his hand. Then he takes one of them between his fingers, shows it around the circle like a magician making sure everyone sees he’s legit, and then slips it into the revolver. He closes the cylinder and gives it a spin. You want to say something, you want to put out your hand, touch his arm, but it’s too beautiful to stop, too cool, too righteous. He lifts the revolver to his temple. He smiles, finally looks at you, at each of the *vatos*, and then the hammer is drawing back, in slow-motion like a Jackie Chan movie. . . . And then there is the click, the empty click.

“Shit, man,” says Inca, who never says anything.

“*Ese*,” Extra-Cheese murmurs.

But you are rooted to the sidewalk. Even when Psycho-Chico spits and takes the revolver from Plato, gives the cylinder a spin, and with a fuck-you look puts it to his own temple, even then you can’t move, can’t move even when there’s an explosion somewhere and a piece of Psycho-Chico’s skull spins into your white chinos leaving a map of blood you will never wash out—because you know a new world has happened, you have been given a new world and the question is, *ese*, what are you going to do with it?

✱

It is 1934 and you are the principal of the Schiller-Oberschule. You have received a directive from the *Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda* that all students are to be instructed in the proper performance of the National Socialist salute. You are practicing it yourself in the mirror in your office. You are a little dismayed to see that the shoulder of your tailored suit bunches up whenever you perform the salute, but that is not the question before you. The question before you is what to do with the Jewish students—are they to be included in the lesson, or are they to be excused? The directive is unclear, saying in one place “*alle deutsche Studenten*” and in another “*alle Studenten in Deutschland*,” which, as you see, leaves the question unsettled. You do not wish to be delinquent in your responsibilities in this matter but—damn that suit jacket!—but just what *are* your responsibilities?

✱

You were born in the village of the streams. Your father and your grandfather were charcoal-makers in the Jbalan highlands. Even today, though you have lived all of your young life in Tangier, they call you a *Jibli*, a person from the mountains.

There are two girls. They are both—strange, yes?—they are both named Hannan. There is Hannan of the cobblestone quarter and there is Hannan of the Suq al-barra. You are meant to marry the first Hannan—how lucky you are! people tell you, how good she is! how beautiful, her skin is like milk!—but it is Hannan of the Suq al-barra you cannot get out of your thoughts.

The brideprice for Hannan of the cobblestone quarter is two hundred thousand francs. Your stepfather cannot help mentioning this. He is proud that it is so much. She is the daughter of al-Hajj Murad Zillal, who owns a tobacco store. He has educated her well and she has passed the exam for the *brevet* and is qualified to be a secretary. There is even talk that she may go on to the *École Régionale d'Instituteurs* when, after a year, she will have the certificate to teach elementary school. If this happens, your stepfather boasts, her brideprice will be even higher.

You do not know what the brideprice is for Hannan of the Suq al-barra. There is no one to inquire on your behalf. It cannot be much.

You limit yourself to going every third day, walking after school up the Street of the Jewelers. To disguise your interest you usually buy some bread or *gwaz* and wander among the stalls, eating. You do it in such a way that it will appear that you have just happened upon the mother and daughter who sell coriander and parsley. Each day you pray that she will be there, because sometimes her mother sends her to the *muqaf*, the “standing place” where women offer themselves for menial labor. You are old enough to know that, for a poor girl, it is only a step from the *muqaf* to the bars of the Bni Yidir quarter.

She is not as pretty as the other Hannan. Her skin is dark and there is hair—like black cirrus clouds—along her cheeks. But her eyes have light in them. Her hips move like animals inside her *jillaba*. She smiles at you, laughs at you, ridicules your school jacket and tie. She calls your family the parsley-eating family. She arches her eyebrows as if daring you to claim her.

They live, you have found out, in a hut made of flattened oil drums in the eastern shantytown.

You go to your eldest stepbrother for advice. He is a *talib* and is known for his calm ideas. A Moroccan man does not fall in love with a woman, he says. To fall in love with a woman is to cause your manhood to leave you. His name is Si Ahmad Qasim. He has memorized the Quran. Go to the mosque, he tells you—he touches you kindly—go to the mosque and wash your heart.

You climb the Street of the Jewelers. You take off your tie on the way.

Her hair is black like charcoal. Her laugh is like a shooting star. When you hear the call to prayer coming over the rooftops it is to Hannan of the Suq al-barra that you wish to turn, to her you wish to kneel. *Allahu akbar*, you whisper in penitence, *La ilaha illa Allah*, but it is no good. You cannot help yourself. Allah is in her hair, in her hips, in the hem of her *jillaba* dragging in the dust.

✱

It's 1941. You are in Dachau. Do you . . .

✱

Okay, this is the problem: your goddamn mother takes your eight-year-old daughter to the library and unbeknownst to you lets her check out a book on her card and of course you have no *cognizance* of this fact so when the library sends your mother an overdue notice you have to turn the house upside down and you'll be *damned* if you're going to trek halfway across Memphis and return the book yourself, so you instruct your daughter to walk over to her grandma's house and leave the book in some *clear and obvious* place like the hall table where she puts her mail or even on the Mr. Coffee in the kitchen, somewhere she's sure to find it, which is what the little angel does, only your *other* daughter, your elder daughter, the slut, is helping your mother move some things that weekend and somehow ("inadvertently," the slut says later) she *inadvertently* puts the book in her car and drives off with it, only when she stops at a Jack-B-Nimble for a Big One she leaves her engine running and her car gets carjacked (you are not making this up!) by a teenage lowlife who you later opine to the police could've gotten more than just the car from your daughter if he'd only *asked*, but who turns out to be a sad case with *issues*, being a product of divorce and Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and not getting proper nutrition as a child because of Republican cuts to ADC and the car is found later in Nashville with not only the CD-player missing and your daughter's cell phone too but of course the library book, and now your mother's got a lump in her breast and your elder daughter's moved back into the house but what *you* want to know is who's going to pay the \$17 library fine?

✱

No one asks anymore except the ghosts, but if they did, this is what you would say:

You would say that the letter was written by you and by no one else. That you yourself posted it to *Leningradskaya Pravda*. That you were not and had never been approached by anyone from the Union of Soviet Writers or the secret police. That Comrade Akhmatova's subsequent expulsion from the writers' union and the arrest and imprisonment of her son had nothing to do with you. You wrote the letter because your husband died in the war and your baby died during the siege and because you saw her when she returned after the blockade and the sight of her alongside the Fontanka Canal—well-fed, celebrated, alive—angered you.

It was summer then. Your knees were still bulbous from the famine, your arms like wands, but you were feeling so much better that you managed to walk the kilometer to the Hall of Columns where you heard some of her poetry read. And there was that one poem about *her* Leningrad and the war suffering and the pigeons in front of Kazan Cathedral and that is what you attacked her for. Because there had been no

pigeons in front of Kazan Cathedral during the siege, no pigeons there or anywhere else in Leningrad. They had all been eaten. The pigeons and the crows, the dogs and the cats. You had been there. You had seen it. You had boiled your handbag into jelly, fed your baby the horsehide paste from off the back of your bedroom wallpaper. Comrade Akhmatova had not.

So you wrote your letter and it became part of the uproar, evidence of the famous poet's enmity to the Soviet order, her *antinarodnost*. And people knew who you were. They pointed you out. The braver ones asked you about it.

That was sixty years ago. Now in front of the Winter Palace half-naked teenagers eat out of McDonald's bags and listen to Run-DMC. BMWs fly past the Admiralty. You walk through the tangerine- and lemon-colored city in a kind of delirium, talking to the statues, to the ghosts, to the mounded earth in the Piskariovskoye Cemetery. The tourists wonder at you, but they have come to see St. Petersburg, and you, you live in Leningrad.

In the winter you can still see them, the corpses on the street corners. They are wrapped in sheets or someone's parlor curtains. Up and down Nevsky Prospekt the trolley cars sit shagged in ice. There is no electricity to run them. No way to clear the tracks of snow. Inside—did they stop to rest and never get up again?—there are corpses seated, facing forward, waiting. They will still be there tomorrow when you pass, and the next day.

In Hay Square you can tell the ones who have given in. They have hot eyes and pink cheeks. They sell packets of ground meat for rubles, for jewelry, for your wedding ring. If you ask them, they will tell you it is horsemeat. You cross yourself at the sight of them, step into the street to go around them. A car honks at you but of course there are no cars. There is no petrol. You make your way through the snowdrifts. There is the impossible smell of American French fries. Somewhere a businesswoman is talking on a cell phone. When finally you reach the cemetery the corpses are stacked like railroad sleepers.

When you saw her, years later, standing in the market along the Obvodny Canal in a shawl and a karakul coat, sorting through a vendor's pile of boots—how worn her own were!—should you have gone up to her? Should you have gone up to her and explained who you were, asked her for forgiveness?

On Sadovaya Street you walk behind a child's sled being pulled by two skeletons. Draped across the sled is a woman with frozen skin. She stares up at the winter sky. She has no coat on. Her hair trails behind her in the snow.

Back at your flat you lie on your bed. In the next room your nine-month-old daughter lies in a laundry basket. She has been dead for six days. For six days you have not had the strength to get out of bed and carry her across the city to the stack of dead outside the cemetery. The wallpaper is gone from the walls of your room. Out your window a foot is sticking out of the ice in the Obvodny Canal. In a moment, you tell yourself, you will get up. In a moment you will have the strength and you will get up and go out into the city. You will walk to the cemetery. You will do that, at least, for her.

✱

You are the Creator. It is 1.8^2 seconds after the Big Bang and everything is going swimmingly. The other universe that could have happened at 10^{-1} seconds didn't, in fact, happen (as You knew it wouldn't), and You are in the first microseconds of being distributed through time and space. Electrons and positrons are zipping about annihilating one another. Every few minutes, just as a *divertissement*, You double in size. In a little while it'll be every million years. At the tips of Your fingers and toes the first galaxies are beginning to form, and You are already looking forward to the details: stars, planets, life. It's twelve billion years away but what the heck, You're in no hurry. You've been through this before—expansion and contraction, bang and crunch—only this time, on some out-of-the-way planet, how about a race of ethical beings, someone to keep You company in the interstellar dark, not like the last universe with its clockwork animalism, its amoral squids—*pah!* all that instinct!

You lean back and stretch Your toes, sip Your cosmic daiquiri. You can hardly wait. This is going to be a good one. This is going to be fun.